

# The Islanders

BY WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

THERE were not so many Islanders in Old Harbor when Man'el Costa came with his pale wife and pale boy. I remember seeing them that day, huddled together on the boat-wharf, with their meager and multicolored belongings about them, like shipwrecked voyagers facing a new world after a tumultuous and losing battle with the sea.

The wife perplexed me, with her brown hair and light eyes. She was beautiful in a way, or rather she had been beautiful, for her beauty was of that soft, ephemeral kind that breaks quickly under pressure of pain or trouble, shadowing the failure of the inner self.

The man at her side showed by no impatient sign that he felt the interminable monotone of her discontent gnawing at him—only looked away at the new town with a sort of valiant wonder and expectancy. He was of the fine, dark, heavy-chested, full-belted type, with a narrow, sinister mustache and kindly, almost beseeching eyes. He seemed pathetically over-young for the son of eleven at his side.

The boy was the son of the mother, but with him the beauty was still in the perfect flower, still full of a marvelous and shrinking joy in things, untouched by the blight of spiritual frailty that had withered hers.

The wife died before the first month was out—the flower already blighted had suffered overmuch from the transplanting. And I do believe it was as well she should go. Had she been a little sweeter, or the man a little less sweet, they might have worn life along between them somehow. As it was, he would have come down to her under slow torture, and she would have wished for death.

Nothing went well with Man'el. That year was a bad one for every one in Old Harbor, but for him, with funeral expenses and all, things were black. He got on with a weir crew, and an October gale plucked up their nets and flung them

out to sea. He shipped with a fishing-schooner, and the first ugly day in the Channel robbed them of more gear than the next two trips were worth. He lasted hardly longer than that. Men said he was too soft for the business—that he loved the sight of land too much to stand up on a week-long trip.

The truth was that his spirit never rested when the boy, Tony, was out of his sight. It was as though he saw in him the mother of happier years, and tried to ward off the inevitable hand of the same change with a wall of care and affection—the love that so often cripples what it means to preserve. It is no wonder he did not get on, with that unforgivable soft spot—unforgivable among any people that follow the sea. But always he had the valiant air.

His air was just as valiant when he had been there three years, and a black misgiving in him was shaping itself toward the certainty that for some reason he had been marked for ill-fortune, and that the blight of it must not touch Tony; that the thing he could not do in his wretchedness for Tony another must do. So behind his brave mask he made ready for the sacrifice.

Then, as though the time had been preconcerted, an Italian tramp steamer ran into Old Harbor under the threat of a gathering storm. The gale beat the coast for a week, and the captain of the tramp, who was something of a dandy in his way, light and gracious and amused with life, spent his days ashore. He seemed to take a fancy to Tony, and the boy's spirit went out to him.

One day he showed Tony through the mysterious bowels of his iron tub, and that evening there was a hint of a swagger in the boy's walk and he took off his little cap with an air of bravado that seemed as old as he. The captain, who came ashore with him, said he would have to take Tony away and show him the world and make a man of him.

That was the first time any one had ever seen the look of anger in Man'el Costa's eyes. But he had no anger behind it; it was only the shadow of a fearful bewilderment. That expression was still there, a baleful and terrible thing, when Tony, who had welcomed the thought of going at first, clung about his neck at the moment of actual parting and fought off the captain, who tried to coax him into the cabin with an orange, and had to take him in the end by force.

I was at the Round Hill life-saving station next morning when Man'el came up over the smooth back of a dune some fifty yards to the east, with a spy-glass under his arm and that hopeless, raging look still on his face. He had come to bid his boy a second good-by. Lucy Miera stood beside him, a very daughter of the gray sea and the gray sky and the gray, wind-swept land, and listened, without a clear understanding, to the breaking of his heart. How she came there I do not know. She was an orphan, living with an aunt who had too many children of her own to pay much attention to the goings and comings of the girl. I suppose she had been picking berries along Snail Road when Man'el trudged past on his lonely errand. I doubt not the man's empty hand, so long accustomed to the clasp of a child's, had opened instinctively to her, and she had taken it quite naturally and followed on.

No one can know just what that half-hour did to Man'el Costa. While he watched a fragment of every-day drama play itself out on the stage of the two-inch lens before his eyes, Lucy, with her child mind, could only understand dimly that something was wrong; she heard the rage within him, but she could not have known what the flame had found to feed upon, which was the valiant spirit of him.

The captain of the Italian steamer was beating the boy—nothing more.

He turned at length to walk back across a flat expanse of sand that lost its farther boundaries in the mist, the picture of a restless and hopeless spirit starting out on a gray road to the last confines of space, followed by a lesser and gayer spirit suddenly touched by the same chill.

Three days after that the gamble of the fish-weirs turned for Man'el. That was a fine irony of fortune. Balancing precariously on the slippery bottom of the dory, the stealthy excitement of his mates empty for him as the flicker, flicker, flicker began to whisper along the dark edges of the weir, he looked down blankly into the great bowl of the net where the water curdled and blackened in growing tumult, with the price that would have bought him his own son—too late. They drew the trap five times that day, and each time it was full to the gates. From that catch all our present-day catches are measured.

When the crew came ashore on their last trip, Lucy Miera came dancing along the beach, laughing and clapping her hands. She waded out to the dory, all in her shoes and stockings, and patted Man'el's sleeve in great delight.

"Oh, ain't it nice!" she cried. "Now you'll be rich—and Tony 'll be rich when he comes back." That seemed to start a perfectly new train of thought in his mind. After a time he spoke.

"Tony, he come back, and he'll been reesh." Then he jumped out into the water and took her by the hand, almost fiercely, adding, "An' you'll been heez wive, Lucy Miera, you'll been my Tony's wive."

This was Lucy's betrothal to Man'el's son.

For Lucy had come over to Man'el's house, quite naturally, the morning after Tony went away. I do not believe the man would have spoken to any other person. It is one of the things we cannot explain, this sudden touching of hands by two strange spirits without any conscious negotiation of terms. I suppose it was the instinct to play house in the real that brought Lucy to him in the beginning. She puttered about, keeping his house in fine state, while Man'el sat low down on the doorstep, talking of the Islands and Tony.

Through the years which followed, those two played a wonderful game between them, a game as unconscious as it was enthralling. It had its own catch-words and symbols, its gestures and formulas. In that game the name of Tony was everything, a sort of solitary chessman, moved hither and thither by the players

with touching belief in its importance. Lucy loved this disembodied Tony—Tony of the delicate, sweet spirit and constant fresh wonder in things—with a love such as only a girl at seventeen can give to an image. Those years under the tutelage of Man'el Costa did a deal for her capacity for sheer love.

And Man'el loved Lucy, always through Tony. He loved her way of doing this or that—because Tony would be charmed with it when he came back; Tony would adore the shape of Lucy's head and the way the blue-black hair clung about it, shadowing the long, straight eyes that curled at the corners under the heavy lashes; his ears would be ravished by the queer little up-tilt at the end of her grave sentences. Tony would be ineffably happy—as Man'el was now happy. That was the game. And all the time, underneath it and constantly veiled by it, was the certainty, to him, that Tony would never come.

Never was such an idealist. For it was an ideal—an ideal for which he had to fight as the months and years went by. I had a glimpse of that fight when he came to me for advice during the third winter. He wanted to make some arrangement whereby his little wealth should become the property of his son at the moment of his return to Old Harbor. And so it was executed.

It was about this time that we began to notice the return of the valiant air, flickering and occasional at first, as though the youth that was really his, and had been lost for a time, was coming back with tentative gladness to meet the unfolding womanhood so near to him.

It seems preposterous that, in all the seven years after Tony went away, none of us should have seen through that game of theirs, and should have gone on in our lives with the unthought-out consciousness that Lucy Miera was another's. Especially is it inexplicable that the man should not have understood. But he did not understand, and they did not, till that night when the two sat in silent and terrible wonder, watching their world go to pieces.

When the dead come to life there is generally something of the spectacular in their reincarnation. Nothing could have been less spectacular than the return

of Tony Costa to Old Harbor, and nothing more dramatic.

He was discovered, one morning in late October, standing in front of Perry's dry-goods store, examining a display of shoes with the casual air of a chance passer-by. The harbor was full of strange craft from all ends of the earth. They were coming in all that day, driven to shelter by the silent threat of the barometer and the lowering menace of the sky. Weather signals had been up on Town Hill for three days. Tony had come ashore from a Lisbon freighter, as we afterward discovered.

Before long a crowd had gathered about him. He stood at his ease, playing with the questions of the ring about him with the perfect poise and confidence and enjoyment of a master fingering the keyboard of a piano.

"Hey, Tony," some one called from the crowd, "guess the old man was glad to see you, wa'n't he?"

Tony looked blank for an instant, then laughed aloud, finished rolling a cigarette, lit it, and laughed again.

"That's right—I hadn't thought—my old man is here."

Man'el Costa was coming down the street at that moment, walking slowly, with Lucy at his side. Somebody stopped him and spoke in his ear. I saw him start, turn and look at Lucy without a word, then stride down the opening lane toward his son. There was a look of wonder on his face, mingled with gladness, and a little fear, I believe. He came to a stop in front of Tony, as though at a loss suddenly for what to say or do. He looked around at all of us, but not at Tony. The tense and awkward silence lasted for many seconds. It was the younger man who broke it.

"Well—I'm back."

Man'el shuddered, seemed to look over our heads at the girl standing alone across the street, then turned and held out his arms mechanically, as though the gesture had been rehearsed many times.

"My boy—my boy—my boy!" His cry had the quality of a declamation spoken by a school-boy on a Friday afternoon.

Lucy had not moved since Man'el left her. I think I have never seen the soul of any one come out, naked and without reserve, as the soul of Lucy Miera came

out and waited while the two men walked across the street toward her, each playing with the valiant air; the one because it amused him, the other desperately. She waited, and they came up to her, and passed on without a sign.

All the way up the street she kept apart from the curious crowd, her wondering eyes always on the two men who made up her world, as though from their moving silhouettes she might read the meaning of that rebuff. Oh, but she was beautiful that morning, walking straight and bewildered along the olive floor of the sandy street, with a pale and ghost-like shadow lingering behind, as though fearful of going where she was going. She was only a few yards from me, and I could not keep my eyes from her face, across which no visible flicker of doubt passed in all that sore time. She had reared her ideal in a fine school, and now her ideal had taken shape and substance before her eyes; why she could not yet come into possession she did not know, but it must be all right.

That evening I went up to the little house, having been asked to arrange the matter of the property. Tony knew about it by this time—Man'el had talked of it all day, persistently, desperately. So he had avoided the vital subject, Lucy Miera.

Now he sat warming his hands over the stove, in which no fire was burning. Lucy stood just inside the door, a little rigid in her erect pose, looking always at Man'el, and swallowed up, as were both of us, by the fact that when Tony returned from his walk he would know about it; that one or another of his old friends must have told him of Lucy, and of Lucy's strange betrothal.

After a long time we heard him coming. He was very handsome in his way when he stepped in, a round cap set challengingly on the brown curls above the tanned pallor of his face. As he passed the girl at the door he lifted the round cap and looked at her. Yes, he knew. Any man could have seen that. In that look there must have been something new to Lucy Miera, for she flushed and dropped her eyes, feeling nervously behind her at the knob of the open door. He passed on, took a seat near his father, and began to examine the back of a wrist

with minute care. After a hard moment of silence he spoke, still without seeming to look up.

"I been talking with some old friends—ah—they say they're old friends of mine—"

He broke off, looking up suddenly with the old wondering smile, as though in depreciation of his implied cynicism. Man'el made as though to rise, then settled back, nodded and smiled in confused approbation. It seemed to me, all through the evening, that Man'el was forever on the point of getting to his feet. Tony looked down and went on.

"I want you to tell me something, my father. Tell me—ah—how can anybody stay in this place a week and keep from going crazy?"

Man'el looked across the room at Lucy, and for the first time that day their eyes met, wide, bewildered. These two had lived in a world of each other so long they could only slowly take hold of that appalling question, and then they must have followed it out together, for the man's answer was shadowed on the moving lips of the girl.

"De Islands, Tony? Yez, I use' to t'ink I lak go back to de Islands maybe."

"Islands?" Tony seemed to play with the thought. "Yes, there's lots of nice islands. But what would you want to go on an island for? There's plenty of places where people get something out of life—where you can see them moving about and taking their pleasure—where things happen, and you can do something besides think about yourself."

Man'el said nothing. He only looked up at Lucy, who had continued looking at him. It was as though they reached out dumbly to take each other's hands. For their world had begun to turn over. Tony extracted a microscopic sliver from the back of his wrist, and went on.

"You know, my father, you did a big thing for me when you packed me off that time. I thought about myself too much then—I did for years, getting the lickings you never gave me, before I found out the world don't love a soft man. If you don't laugh at it, it 'll laugh at you. Ain't that so, my father?" He ended with a flicker of laughter, as spontaneous and unspoiled as that of a child. Man'el nodded and joined in the

mirth, rubbing his hands over the cold stove. In Lucy's eyes was a look of the pain that comes to every woman, but to her it came in the acid of an hour, not in the brackish tide of the years.

Then Tony began a wonderful tale, a tale made up of occasional and haphazard chapters from the years of his wanderings. He took us to far places, made us the intimates of fantastic scoundrels, confederates in questionable undertakings; standing apart from all and viewing his own lightness with high amusement, playing the careless Othello with a snapping finger.

I was carried away with it. Man'el sat through the hours, carrying out mechanically all the gesture of absorbed attention. Lucy had relaxed a little and now leaned against the door, watching the face of Man'el with troubled eyes. Tony had been playing to her all the evening. Now he displayed his cards abruptly.

"Look how it is, my father. Do you think if I had come home begging and whining, things would be like they are? No. I didn't want to come back, and here I am thrown at the door. I looked for nothing—asked for nothing—and what do I find?" He flung a hand about him. "My house—my money. Now I can go away, wherever I want, with new clothes on my back and money in my pocket. And with me"—he turned swiftly toward the doorway—"with me I can take my—"

"Lucy!" Man'el was on his feet at last. He beckoned to the girl with a fine gesture, the gesture he had played in the game all these years, the gesture to which he had clung all the length of that day as the one thing left to him from the wreck of his dream, since the symbol through which he had offered his great love to Lucy had taken on flesh and blood and desires of its own, and stood there to claim what she had offered it blindly. But when he made that gesture he did it superbly, with a fine flourish. He called to the girl, "Lucy, come here."

And Lucy went, moving rigidly. Tony, without rising, looked at her with bright eyes, taking her in deliberately from the slim ankles to the soft, clinging hair of her head. I saw that much from the

open door, whither I had moved. Then he rose quickly, with a little laugh, and closed the door, leaving me in the empty blackness.

As I passed down through Cook Street I saw the weather signals still flying on Town Hill. The black expanse of the harbor was pricked by the riding-lights of a score of strange ships. Highland Light was dead, shrouded in vapor. All around the outside the whistling-buoys talked dismally of the fog. The world was trembling on the verge of a great sickness.

The next day was Sunday. Through the shifting crowds on the front street moved Man'el, walking between his son and Lucy. Lucy's hand was on his arm and her eyes were lowered under the stare of all the curious people. Her hair was done in the tight complexity of a ceremonial occasion, a little spot of high color burned on either cheek. They were on their way to put up the banns, or the "reading out," as they say in Old Harbor.

All that afternoon Man'el made himself insinuatingly conspicuous about the streets. His talk—and he talked with every one—was all of his plans for his own future. Never did any one embark, prospectively, upon such alluring and fabulous adventures in contentment. But we might all have been figures of clay; he was talking to himself, in a desperate attempt to silence a wild design which persistently refused to be silenced.

It was a losing fight—had been from the beginning, and he knew it. About eight o'clock in the evening the weather signals were hauled down from the pole on Town Hill, and immediately afterward the whole water-front took on a new life of noisy and purposeful movement. A strident riot of fog-horns blared shoreward from invisible ships, calling on straggling crews to come off; men plunged into the black mouths of wharf lanes, on their ways to the ends of the earth. We of the town gathered along the wharves to watch the departure of the strangers. One of the ships, a brigantine of our own, was bound out to the Islands, and three fishermen, near me on Mayo's wharf, were pointing her out to one another, riding formless within the triangle of her swaying lights, with gestures of special interest and good-will.

I have always remembered those gestures as strangely significant.

For at that moment Man'el Costa must have been clambering over the rail of that brigantine, a fugitive. How it came to be known so quickly is a thing I cannot explain. The news of it sprang up in every man's words along the waterfront like a spontaneous growth—Man'el Costa's going back to the Azores.

We all wondered why he was going, and at this of all times, and what he had said to Tony and Lucy. Men put the question and speculated on the answers in loud hails across the open spaces between the wharves—simple people, unabashed in face of the romantic.

Now we know that he had said nothing to either of them. He had gone furtively, straining at the oars of some obscure dory, his face turned toward the black silhouette of the town and contorted with that expression of malignant rage that stood for fear of himself—like a sullen outcast fleeing under the darkness from the scene of some misdeed. Inwardly, I believe, he went with the old valiant sweetness, playing the game with himself to the end.

Then, suddenly, Lucy was among us. I wish I could make you see her as I saw her, standing in a circle of light on the sand near the shore of Mayo's wharf. The rays of the lantern at her feet picked out her features in a new, odd aspect, and as though with the very inversion of the accustomed light the familiar spirit of Lucy Miera had given place to that of a stranger. A Lucy had grown up in Old Harbor—they had all known her—unfaintly sweet, shy without false constraint, always trying to understand the other and questioning herself if she failed, a flower lifting her cup to her world without thought that it might be soiled. But here, suddenly, was a thing of fire, a spirit of naked flame burning high in writhing and tormented magnificence. Her arms were out before her in tense appeal, her fingers clenched, her head thrown back; her words were low and monotonous and unbearable, carrying undiminished to the edges of the crowd.

"Take me—oh, take me!"

For she had seen at last. The hand of sudden and compelling necessity had

shown her what the length of dead years might never have been able to make her understand. In a flash of light it had stripped her ideal of its fanciful vestments and shown her the spirit of Man'el, who had always and inevitably lived there. Then she knew that she wanted Man'el, only Man'el, passionately, terribly, her soul and blood calling out for him with all the pent-up flood of years—and that he was gone.

"Take me—oh, take me!" she was crying.

Then men in the circle about her stood abashed and helpless, because they could not understand. One among them did understand, but he stood aloof as the solitary spectator of a vast tableau, realizing with the relish of a connoisseur that here was a masterpiece. He had the cue to dissolve the tableau, and, being so pleased with the spectacle, he withheld it for an agonizing time, marked off by the grating of distant anchor-ropes.

When he gave it finally, his light words did not carry to us, but we could see by his gesture that he was explaining something to the men about him. Before we understood what it was all about, the circle of light was empty and a sound of crying oars passed below us in the dark.

After that we watched the lights in the harbor—the light in the harbor. Some one would cry out, "There she moves—I guess they didn't catch her." And then, after a long minute or so, from another, "No, that wasn't her—that's her to the west'ard." Then it became certain that she was moving, that her light was passing other lights, that she was gone. We were still trying to adjust ourselves to the new finality of things, when the note of the crying oars grew upon us once more.

Well, they were there, Man'el and Lucy, in the stern-sheets of the dory, looking at each other as men and women have looked at one another through the ages. The men who rowed that dory will never say much about it; when they do, it is that the two talked to each other as strangers who had heard of each other for years but had never met. I saw them walk up the slope of that beach together, against the background of a black and tumultuous crowd—alone in all the world.